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AUTHOR Allwright, Dick
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ABSTRACT

Language teachers have responded to the special pedagogical needs created by large language classes as they arise rather than addressing them comprehensively. This may result from both guilt about the relatively small size of even the large language classes, and fear that expression of concern might be mistaken for trying to find an excuse for teaching problems. Limited research evidence suggests that large classes are not interfering with learning achievement. Further empirical research is needed on language pedagogy and on greater extremes of class size. Four alternative interpretations of the issue of class size are available. These include the following: (1) class size is not a problem, just an excuse; (2) class size really is a problem, but not interesting enough; (3) class size is a problem, but insoluble; or (4) class size is a problem, but a politically dangerous area to address pedagogically. It is wide open to imaginative research on both pedagogical and political aspects. The Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project evolved not to undertake research but to promote it. Its activities have involved discussion, development of a bibliography, design and administration of preliminary questionnaires, development of a mailing list, dissemination of research papers, and organization of awareness-raising events. (MSE)

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LANCASTER - LEEDS

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES

RESEARCH PROJECT

IS CLASS SIZE A PROBLEM?

DICK ALLWRIGHT

PROJECT REPORT NO. 3

Dick Allwright
Is Class Size a Problem?

Published by Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project

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Lancaster-Leeds
Language Learning in Large Classes
Research Project

Overseas Education Unit
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
U.K.

Tel : 0532-334569
Telex : 556473 UNILDS G
Fax : 0532-336017

Department of Linguistics
and Modern English Language
University of Lancaster
Lancaster LA1 4YT
U.K.

Tel : 0524-65201
Telex : 65111 LANCUL G
Fax : 0524-63806

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1 The Lancaster-Leeds Project : A Reaction To A Perennial Challenge (1)

The Lancaster-Leeds Project is in considerable measure a reaction to a challenge we have been hearing for a good many years, but perhaps not paying quite enough attention to. As teachers of applied linguistics we have all too often found ourselves in the position of talking about ideas for language teaching that some of our students, all experienced teachers, find impractical because 'they wouldn't work in "large"(2) classes'. We have tended to meet that challenge as it has arisen, and dealt with it most probably in a transparently ad hoc manner rather than take it on board as a major issue to address fully and comprehensively. I believe that our apparently half-hearted response belies a mixture of guilt and suspicion on our part, and that it is now time to try to analyze the situation and to find ways to understand the world-wide issue of 'large' classes.

2 The Nature Of The Reaction : The Guilt

Firstly, why should we feel at all guilty? Obviously it has to be at least imaginable that some of our ideas, however well founded we may consider them to be in substantial thinking and perhaps even in practical experience, are practically irrelevant, because unworkable, for people who face 'large' classes. We do, after all, work in conditions of comparative luxury compared to

the experiences of many of our students. We do tend to have relatively small classes, and to enjoy relatively good resources, even if we do individually also have experience of highly unfavourable conditions elsewhere in the world. And, in addition, we do tend to run the risk of being identified with extremism in language pedagogy, even if that extremism, in our own eyes, seems hardly radical any more. That identification with extremism can lead also to an identification with experimental pedagogy, an identification many of us would no doubt welcome, but that in turn can mean an identification with artificial, unreal, situations.

3 The Nature Of The Reaction : The Suspicion

Secondly, why should we feel suspicious, in any way, about the challenge made to us? What reason do we have for doubting that 'large' classes do indeed make classroom language teaching any more difficult, or any less effective? One reason is that this particular challenge, however familiar and perennial, has not been the object of research to any noticeable extent. It has not even been written about very much. Certainly our own bibliographical work is discovering a good number of items that deal, or purport to deal (our bibliography has a category of 'misleading references'), in one way or another, with the topic of 'large classes', but they do not, typically, actually probe empirically into the question of the relative effectiveness of

language classes of different size. That much is taken for granted, it seems. But why should the literature be willing to take something so apparently major on trust? It raises the suspicion that the people who complain about their 'large' classes making it impossible for them to innovate are perhaps really only trying to find a plausible excuse for a general, if understandable, reluctance to rethink their whole approach to language pedagogy.

4 The Evidence So Far On Class Size

It is easy for academics in applied linguistics to claim that the issue of class size has not been researched at all adequately, but such a claim does not itself deserve to be simply taken on trust. What is the evidence? Basically, the evidence seems to be that there is hardly a problem to be identified as resulting from class size, not if learner achievement is the criterion. Stephens summed up the relevant research in 1967, and nothing has happened to change the picture significantly since that time. In a chapter that deserves to be famous (Chapter 7), Stephens reviewed comprehensively all the available literature on supposedly relevant variables and could find no stable evidence in favour of class size as a significant factor. Certainly there were studies that found in favour of 'small' classes, but there were also studies that found in favour of 'large' ones. And there were no studies that addressed the important issue of

establishing the conditions under which class size might or might not matter.

Until there is a solid basis of new and more convincing research evidence, then, we would seem justified in drawing the conclusion that class size is not really quite the problem language teachers from around the world would wish us to believe. That, however, would be too comfortable for us applied linguists, and not in fact wholly justified, for two reasons. Firstly, the evidence we have is not from language classes but from all subjects on the curriculum. It is at least imaginable that language pedagogy poses special problems for teachers with 'large' classes to deal with. Secondly, the evidence we have to date is also largely from parts of the world where class sizes, though varied enough to permit statistical comparisons, are not really in the same range of sizes as can be found in less well-resourced areas. Perhaps it is entirely understandable if going from twenty to thirty learners makes little or no difference, but the teachers who challenge us on the issue are often thinking of classes with sixty or more learners in them.

In the circumstances it is prudent to suggest, as always, that 'more research is clearly needed'. We need empirical research specifically on language pedagogy, and we need research on greater extremes of class size. We should not be too optimistic about the feasibility of producing valid comparisons in situations where class sizes are at the extremes of largeness,

however, since it is very difficult to imagine a setting in which it would be possible to ensure that class size was the only variable at play. We might, for example, find a setting in which there were classes of one hundred in rural areas, and of only sixty in relatively affluent urban areas, but it would be foolish to suggest that such classroom groups could be considered comparable in all other respects. We need much more research, then, but it is not going to be at all easy to design and implement 'definitive' studies in our field, and meanwhile we do have a rather long and disturbing tradition of general educational research that has failed to show that class size is a significant variable in learner achievement. It would be surprising, to say the least, if we were to be in a position to reverse that tradition.

5 So, What's Going On?

Whatever the outcome of further research on the topic (and we should probably assume that it will in any case not be definitive) we have to face the likelihood that we applied linguists will continue to be challenged on the issue of class size. It is therefore worth continuing with the analysis of the situation. Four alternative interpretations are available :

1 Perhaps class size is really not a problem, just a convenient excuse. It is clearly the chosen diagnosis for a

problem, but it may simply be a convenient label for an assortment of worries, none of which really depend crucially on class size.

2 Perhaps class size really is a problem, but not an 'interesting' one for article writers or researchers. At least two possibilities exist under this heading. It could be that the topic is not 'interesting' because it is too obvious that there is no satisfactory way of doing empirical research on it, research that could hope to establish more or less definitively the relevance of class size to learner achievement. Alternatively, it could be that the topic is not 'interesting' in the sense that it has no obvious theoretical implications. We have perhaps been preoccupied with issues that stood a chance of illuminating our theoretical rather than our strictly practical concerns.

3 Perhaps class size really is a problem but it is seen generally as a hopeless one, insoluble except by elimination. This interpretation would suggest that the only valid answer to 'large' classes is to do away with them by instituting smaller ones. If this is true it would become a political rather than a pedagogic issue, of course, and this would swiftly take it out of our immediate domain. It would come back to haunt us, however, because we would no doubt be called upon to produce the evidence the politicians and administrators would surely, and reasonably, demand : that 'large' classes significantly reduce learner

achievement. This, as we have seen, we would at present and for the foreseeable future be utterly unable to do.

4 Perhaps class size really is a problem, but one that it is in fact dangerous 'politically' to solve 'pedagogically'. This appears no doubt to be an extreme interpretation, but it is one that practical experience in the field shows it is well worth entertaining. What it amounts to is the suggestion that although language teachers around the world may say they want a way of dealing with their 'large' classes, they will somehow have to reject anyone who actually finds a solution, who demonstrates that a given approach does indeed make it possible to achieve perfectly respectable results with 'large' classes. Already we have come across one striking example (see Long 1988) of a teacher finding such a successful way of enabling tutors to meet the needs of language learners at a tutor/learner ratio of 1:120 that he no longer has any powerful arguments to use in favour of employing more tutors! The 'pedagogical' solution has undercut the 'political' argument. This dilemma can take another form, as when someone called in to advise on possible strategies for handling 'large' classes is accused, by classroom language teachers, of actually intending, even before any 'solutions' have been proposed, to persuade them to resign themselves to their fate of having 'large' classes, so that they will be more docile employees in future.

6 So, What Is To Be Done?

It is an area wide open for imaginative research, both into the pedagogy and into the politics. Already we can see that it is a gross oversimplification to suggest, as I have done throughout these few pages, that measurable learner achievement is the only thing that matters, to teachers, to administrators, to politicians, and to learners. Even if we were able to demonstrate 'definitively' that class size need not affect learner achievement, we would still have an abundance of evidence to tell us that teachers, for example, have a whole range of cogent reasons as to why smaller classes are preferable. Teachers in some cultures find it very difficult, for example, to deal with a group so large that it becomes impossible to guarantee being able to get to know every learner by name. That might not affect achievement in any measurable way, but it must be expected to affect a teacher's whole attitude to a career in pedagogy, if having 'large' classes forces one to act in a way that is culturally inappropriate, even in one's own culture.

We need to know much more about both the pedagogy and the politics, therefore, because a pedagogical solution might 'backfire' politically, and because, even if the term 'large class problem' is really only a convenient label rather than a confirmed diagnosis, there is still a whole range of interesting and potentially important issues waiting to be explored and illuminated.

7 The Role Of The Joint Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning In Large Classes Research Project

The main aim of our project is not to undertake research so much as to *promote* research into class size. We will of course undertake it wherever necessary, but we would much prefer, since we are not ourselves continually engaged in teaching 'large' classes, that the research should be done by others, with as much support as we can provide.

Our work so far has involved the following elements:

1 Frequent discussion amongst ourselves, as a research group, to sort out our own preliminary understandings of the issues and of the most urgent priorities.

2 The development of a bibliography, which we are frequently updating.

3 The design and administration of 'ground clearing' questionnaires, firstly to establish the sizes of class people around the world are in fact having to deal with, and what their ideal class size would be, and then to establish what teachers see as the resultant problems - what they feel they cannot do in 'large' classes, what they would wish to do, and what they feel they would be able to do with a reduced class size. We are also

making these questionnaire forms available on request, and offering a data analysis service where required.

4 The development of a mailing list, so that all who want to can keep in touch, so that we can put people in touch with each other, and so that we can help ensure that the overall volume of related research is increased.

5 The dissemination of a series of research papers, some substantial and some, like the present one, more intended as brief but relatively polemical discussion stimulators.

6 The organisation of awareness-raising events such as the TESOL 1988 colloquium, which will, we hope, help raise the profile of class-size research, and prompt many others to join us. We hope it will also help us to hear about other projects to add to our own.

8 Finally, Is Class Size A Problem?

It is probably not the problem we originally thought it was, but it will serve as a convenient umbrella term for our work, just as it may serve teachers as an umbrella term for some of their complaints. In any case there is no doubt in our minds that class size is an interesting and important area in which to be conducting research.

Notes

1 This paper was first presented in the Colloquium 'Language Learning and Teaching in Large Classes : Current Research' which was held during the 1988 TESOL Convention in Chicago.

2 Throughout these pages the term 'large' has been presented in citation form, to indicate that whether or not a class is 'large' is not a matter of absolute numbers but of perception. From our research already it is obvious that twenty is hopelessly 'large' for some language teachers, and hopelessly, idealistically, 'small' for others.

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Project Coordinators

Hywel Coleman
Overseas Education Unit
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
U.K.

Tel : 0532-334569
Telex : 556473 UNILDS G
Fax : 0532-336017

Dick Allwright
Department of Linguistics
and Modern English Language
University of Lancaster
Lancaster LA1 4YT
U.K.

Tel : 0524-65201
Telex : 65111 LANCUL G
Fax : 0524-63806

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